

Dispensational Posttribulational Interpretation

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord explores the complexities of posttribulational interpretation, emphasizing the need to distinguish between the rapture and the second coming of Christ.

Scripture: Luke 4:16

Topics: "Eschatology", "Dispensationalism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the evolution of posttribulationism, highlighting the shift from the doctrine of imminency of the Lord's return to a non-imminent return of Christ, as seen through the works of various theologians like J. Barton Payne, George A. Ladd, and Robert H. Gundry. Gundry's unique approach to posttribulationism challenges traditional dispensational interpretations, emphasizing the distinction between Israel and the church and proposing a gradual transition into the tribulation period rather than a sudden event like the rapture.

Transcript

The New Approach To Posttribulationism

In the history of the church a movement can be observed away from an original doctrine of imminency of the Lord's return, as expounded today by J. Barton Payne, toward a non-imminent return of Christ. As previous discussion in this series of articles has pointed out, while there is confusion in the history of the church on the question of imminency, many of the early church fathers and some of the Protestant Reformers definitely believed that the Lord could come at any time. In order to accommodate themselves to this point of view, they recognized in their contemporary situation the fulfillment of end-time signs of the second advent.

In the twentieth century among posttribulationists there has been a definite trend away from the doctrine of imminency. This is illustrated in the work by George A. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*,^[1] Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956. which was discussed in the previous article. Ladd definitely believes that there is at least a seven-year period which must be fulfilled before the second coming of Christ.

An entirely new approach to posttribulationism appeared for the first time in the work of Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*.^[2] Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970. This work is a further advance away from imminency but is built on premises some of which have never before been used for posttribulationism. Because of the importance of this new view on posttribulationism, this article

will be the first in a series dealing with the principal points in his argument. is a familiar argument which most posttribulationists either state or assume. Important as it is, Gundry for some reason does not devote any of his fifteen chapters to the specific discussion of this question. It may be assumed that this is the undergirding thesis which supports the entire book.

At first glance this seems to be a cogent argument which, to a large extent by inference at least, would support posttribulationism. Careful consideration, however, robs this argument of any real force.

In the Old Testament the first and second comings of Christ were often presented in the same revelation. Isaiah 61:1-2 quoted in part by Christ in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) deals with the first coming of Christ through the phrase in verse 2 , "the acceptable year of the LORD." The next phrase, however, "the day of vengeance of our God" refers to the second coming of Christ. It is significant that Christ in quoting the passage stopped with the portion that dealt with the first coming only.

In the Old Testament it would have been quite cogent to insist that the concept of two comings of the Messiah of Israel was inconceivable. The natural assumption would be that there would be only one coming of Christ in which all the prophecies relating to the comings of Christ would be fulfilled. It would have been difficult on the basis of the Old Testament alone to sustain the concept of a first coming and a second coming of Christ separated by thousands of years. Nevertheless, in the course of history this is exactly what has been supported. The first coming of Christ took place as predicted but the portions of Scripture dealing with the second coming are yet to be fulfilled although exegetically it is impossible to separate them clearly. Historically, fulfillment has demonstrated that they are two distinctive comings. It illustrates that it cannot be presumed that two events that are presented as a single event actually occur at the same time.

In the New Testament the rapture of the church is presented for the first time. Just as the first and second comings of Christ are mingled in prophetic revelation in the Old Testament, so the rapture of the church and the coming of Christ to set up His kingdom are frequently mingled in the New Testament. Many of the same terms are used and exhortations relating to preparation of the two events are similar.

The lesson which can be learned regarding the necessity of separating the first and second comings of Christ is a word of warning that we should not presume that the second coming includes the rapture. Just as in the Old Testament, we can now see the difference between the first and second coming of Christ by studying the particulars that relate to each, so in the New Testament the rapture and Christ's coming to establish His kingdom can be distinguished by itemizing the differences that relate to these two events. While this is not in itself an argument for a pretribulation rapture, it supports the conclusion that the separation of these two events is not illogical or presumptive. The issue which some day will be settled by a prophetic fulfillment must today be determined exegetically. It is not too much to say that most pretribulationists distinguish the rapture from the coming of Christ to set up His kingdom because the two events are presented with such contrasting details in the New Testament. The posttribulationist view cannot throw the burden of proof on the pretribulationist, but the posttribulationist must assume his own responsibility to demonstrate that the events are one and the same.

Does Dispensationalism Preclude Posttribulationism?

Until Gundry's new approach to posttribulationism was published, it was assumed by practically all pretribulationists and posttribulationists that dispensational interpretation automatically led to pretribulationism. J. Dwight Pentecost, for instance, states," (1) Posttribulationism must be based on a

denial of dispensationalism and all dispensational distinctions. It is only thus that they can place the church in that period which is particularly called 'the time of Jacob's trouble' (Jer 30:7). (2) Consequently, the position rests on a denial of the distinction between Israel and the church"[6] J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing House, 1958), p. 164.

George Ladd devotes an entire chapter to dispensationalism in his attack on pretribulationism.[7] Ladd, The Blessed Hope, pp. 130-36. He introduces his chapter with these words: "In this brief chapter, we shall deal with the most important reason used by pretribulationists for refusing to apply the prophecies about the Great Tribulation to the Church. It is so important that it may be called the major premise of dispensationalism." [8] Ibid., p. 130.

This common assumption by both pretribulationists and posttribulationists is debated by Gundry in his second chapter entitled "The Dispensational-Ecclesiological Backdrop." [9] Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation, pp. 12-28. In a rather laborious argument Gundry attempts to correct the prevailing view that dispensationalism leads to pretribulationism in order to establish a basis for his own dispensational posttribulationism. He admits "none of the 'mysteries' distinctive of the Church--such as the equality of Jews and Gentiles in one Body, the Church as the bride of Christ, and Christ's indwelling of believers--are ever applied specifically to tribulation saints." [10] Ibid., p. 13. He then attempts to dismiss this, however, as being insignificant on the premise that "the burden of proof rather rests on pretribulationists to show that tribulation saints will not belong to the Church...." [11] Ibid. Here Gundry attempts to avoid one of the major problems of posttribulationism: that the church by that title is never shown to be in the great tribulation. Why does the burden of proof rest on the pretribulationist?

In discussing the church as a mystery Gundry points out that a number of the truths designated as mysteries, which he properly interprets as New Testament revelation, extend beyond the present age. In this, Gundry is correct. However, the fact that the mystery of lawlessness, the mystery of God, and the mystery of the harlot of Babylon continue into the tribulation is not proof that the church continues in the tribulation. The pretribulationist does not, therefore, argue on the exclusiveness of mystery truth as far as its future fulfillment is concerned, but rather that the church as such, because of the various mystery truths related to it, is never found in the tribulation. Even Gundry admits that the translation of the saints, which is the distinctive feature of the rapture, is declared to be a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. [12] Ibid., p. 14.

Much like opponents of dispensationalism, Gundry argues that the present age is not completely hidden in the Old Testament. Most dispensationalists would concede this. The Old Testament does anticipate a period following the first coming of Christ although it does not specifically reveal the church age as such. Accordingly, the New Testament frequently refers to Old Testament prophecies as being fulfilled in the present age. It is most significant, however, that the particulars mentioned are not those peculiar to the church but those that are natural in a post-Cross situation.

Gundry, like many other posttribulationist writers, makes much of the fact that Israel is promised the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34). Because this is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-13 as proving that the Mosaic Covenant had ceased, Gundry joins amillenarians and some premillenarians in asserting that the covenant with Israel is now being fulfilled in the church. without agreeing with his posttribulationism. The point is, as Gundry himself admits, Israel is in unbelief in this period, and Israelites who believe become part of the church, not a separate redeemed people. Gundry himself says that "the tribulation knows only one group of redeemed people, the Church." [15] Ibid., p. 24. Here is precisely the point. The redeemed people in the tribulation are described as saved Israelites and saved Gentiles, not as "the church." This is one of the

numerous instances where Gundry assumes what he is trying to prove.

In his summary Gundry again contends that the dispensation of the church does not end with a clean break but continues throughout the tribulation period. Here he argues from the premise that there is no clean break to the conclusion that the church is in the tribulation. Logically, it should be just the reverse. The transition should be proved by proving that the church is in the tribulation. Until this is established it is impossible to prove that there is a transition.

Summary

In introducing his argument for posttribulationism, Gundry makes clear at the start that his approach is different than that of any posttribulationist in the past although he adopts many familiar posttribulational arguments. Gundry is, first of all, a dispensationalist who distinguishes Israel from the church. In order to maintain his posttribulationism, however, he attempts to divorce himself from what has been considered normal dispensationalism which calls for a sharp break between the church age and the age between the church and the second coming of Christ. It is essential to Gundry's position that he makes the transition gradual, not an event like the rapture which abruptly terminates the church age. While agreeing with dispensationalists on many points, he differs with them where it would conflict with his posttribulationism. The real problem which Gundry faces is to harmonize his dispensational point of view with posttribulational interpretation in general. Gundry's point of view on the imminence of the rapture and the relationship of the rapture to the wrath of God will be presented in the next article.

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